

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS

Once upon a time the world was dark, and the land where the people lived was in deep darkness. It was as dark as the night in the daytime. It had been dark for so long that the people had forgotten what the light was like. This is what they did; they lit small candles for themselves and pretended it was day. But the world was a gloomy place, and the people who walked in darkness were lonelier than they knew, and the lonely people were sadder than they could say.

But God was in love with the world.

God looked down from heaven and saw that the earth was stuck, like a clock, at midnight. "No," he said. "This isn't good. It's time to make time tick again. Time, time," said the mighty God, "to turn the earth from night to morning."

And God was in love with the people especially.

He saw their little candlelight, and he pitied their pretending. "They think they see," he said, "but all they see is shadow, and people are frightened by shadows. Poor people!" he said. "They wonder why they are afraid." God watched the people move about like fireflies in the night, and he shook his head. "People, pretending to be happy," he said. "Well, I want them to be happy. It's time," declared the Lord our God. "It's time to do a new thing! I'll shatter their darkness. I will send the sunlight down so they can see and know that they are seeing!"

God so loved the world that he sent his only son into the world itself. And this is how he did it:

And there were shepherds in that same dark country, abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

And God turned to his angel. And God said, "Gabriel."

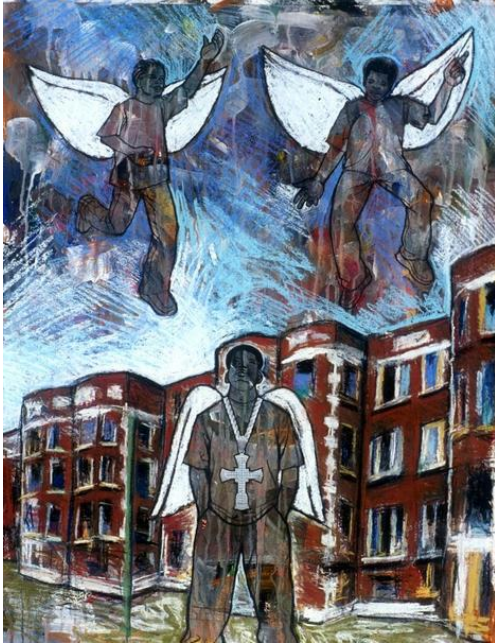
And the angel answered, "Yes, Lord?"

And the Lord God said, "Go down. All of the people must know what I am doing. Tired and lonely and scattered and scared, all of the people must hear it. Go, good Gabriel. Go down again. Go tell a few to tell the others, till every child has heard it. Go!"

And so it was that an angel of the Lord appeared to the weary shepherds. Their dark was shattered, for the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid.

The angel said to them, "Don't be afraid."





But the light was like a hard and holy wind, and the shepherds shielded their faces with their arms.

"Hush, said the angel, "hush," like the west wind. "Shepherds, I bring you good news of great joy, and not only for you but for all of the people. Listen."

So the shepherds were squinting and blinking, and the shepherds began to listen, but none of them had the courage to talk or to answer a thing.

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David," said the angel, "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the sky itself split open, and like the fall of a thousand stars, the light poured down. There came with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace – Peace to the people with whom he is pleased!"

But hush you shepherds. Hush in your wonder. For the choral singing soon was ended. The host ascended, and the sky was closed again. And then there came a breeze and a marvelous quiet and the simple dark of the night. It was just that, no terror in that then. It was only the night, no deeper gloom than evening. For not all of the light had gone back to heaven. The Light of the World himself stayed down on earth and near you now.

And you can talk now. Try your voices. Try to speak. Ah, God has given you generous voices, shepherds. Speak.

So then, this is what the shepherds said to one another:

"Let us," they said, "go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."



So the shepherds got up and ran as fast as they could to the city of Bethlehem, to a particular stable in that city, and in that stable they gazed on one particular baby, lying in a manger.

Then, in that moment, everything was fixed in a lambent, memorial light.

For there was the infant, just waking, just lifting his arms to the air and making sucking motions with his mouth. The holy child was hungry. And there was his mother, lying on straw as lovely as the lily and listening to the noises of her child. "Joseph?" she murmured. And there was Joseph, as sturdy as a barn, just bending toward his Mary. "What?" he whispered.

And the shepherds' eyes were shining for what they saw.

Exactly as though it were morning and not the night, the shepherds went out into the city and began immediately to tell everyone what the angel had said about this child. They left a trail of startled people behind them, as on they went, both glorifying and praising God.



But Mary did not so much as rise that night. She received the baby from Joseph's hands, then placed him down at her breast while she lay on her side in straw. With one arm she cradled the infant against her body. On the other arm, bent at the elbow, she rested her head; and she gazed at her small son sucking.

Mary lowered her long, black lashes and watched him and loved him and murmured, "Jesus, Jesus" for the baby's name was Jesus.

"Joseph?" she said without glancing up.

And Joseph said, "What?"

But Mary fell silent and said no more. She was keeping all these things – all that had happened between the darkness and the light – and pondering them in her heart.

Story by Walter Wangerin (1944 -) in *Light Upon Light*, compiled by Sarah Arthur

Images by Heinrich Vogeler, "Verkuendigung an die Hirten"

Reed Damon Lamar, "Don't Let Nothing Hold You Down"

He Qi, "Glory to God"

Bernard Stanley Hoyes, "Madonna and Child"

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